



Depiction Of The Marginalized In Anita Nair's The Better Man

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Abstract

In the context of Indian literature, marginalization is a representation of various aspects. So, in India there are so many points which show the marginalizations like Dalit, Female, Tribal and gender bias. The situation whereby something or someone is pushed to the edge of a group and accorded lesser importance or little importance at all is termed to be marginalized. This is predominantly a social phenomenon by which a minority or sub-group is excluded, and their needs and desires are ignored. Throughout the world millions of people are affected by this experience of marginality. The marginalized people have little control over their lives and the resources available to them. Due to this they are like handicapped and powerless in the society. The inhuman treatment meted to the marginalized prevents them from participating in local life. Marginalisation deprives a large majority of the people from participating in the development. Many English writers in India have been writing about the social exclusion of the so-called low caste and about their sufferings and exploitations that they undergo without resistance or protest. Writers like Mulkraj Anand, Raja Rao, Bhabani Battaacharya, Arundati Roy have all discussed in a very elaborate way the sufferings and the pitiable plight of this socially excluded group. But Anita Nair has tried to give a warning to the society by depicting what will happen if the weaker sections of the society retaliate. The paper focuses on this aspect with reference to Anita Nair's The Better Man.

Keywords: marginalization, bias, minority, inhuman, social exclusion, exploitation, resistance, protest

The purpose of any literary work is to convey a message to the society. It has to inform the society about the evils prevalent amidst them. It has to create an awakening in the minds of the people. The social issues and their intensity change from time to time. For instance, the aftermath of partition and the consequence were portrayed in the writings after independence. The Indian women's plight like how the poor girls remain unmarried for want of a stout dowry to be given to the grooms, and even if they get married how they become the objects of harassment in the in laws house, how they remain the 'other' are all dealt by different writers during different times.

The purpose of writings of some of the writers are to a certain extent successful in the sense that continuous writings on some social issues have to a certain degree created an awakening in the society and even a partial remedy is found. There are some problems still existing in the society as a fire that appears to be extinguished superficially but raging under the ashes. Marginalization of women and social exclusion of the Dalits are the two major concerns of today's India.

Government schemes and quotas have tried to bridge the social gap by raising the standard of living for Dalits and other marginalized sections of the society, by reserving places in the legislature, government jobs, and in schools and colleges. But these rules by the government have resulted in the increase of violence by caste members. Urbanization, economic development and industrialisation benefit the Dalits by breaking down caste barriers. Due to the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar, a crusader against caste and untouchability and many other social reformers, the marginalized are slowly emerging to have self-identities of their own. This has given them self-respect. But centuries of suppression cannot be easily erased off. The marginalized themselves are not able to mingle freely without inhibition. Their class and caste consciousness is engraved in their minds. It will take a considerable time for them to forget their marginalized status and enjoy the liberty and rights which are legally due for them. The marginalized are still remaining meek and timid in the rural areas of our nation.

The study focusses on the subaltern predicament in Anita Nair's 'The Better Man' in terms of caste and the effect of retaliation by a marginalized. In the novel, Kamban is a Dalit born and brought up in the village of Kaikurussi in Kerala. He is a dark thin man in his mid-forties. He works as a postmaster in the same village. Everything is fine but for one aspect. He is unable to mingle or talk freely with the villagers because he has his own inhibition that arises from his caste consciousness. He belongs to the Harijan community who are kept secluded in the outskirts of the village. The strict code regarding the caste is followed in the village.

Kamban feels very shy to talk to people when they come to the post office for any transaction. He is very business-like with his dealings with the people. He does not speak a word more than what is necessary. "Kamban hadn't made any friends in the village even after so many years. He still didn't have the courage to walk up to Shankar's Tea Club for a cup of tea and chat." (154). People do not speak aloud their dislike of Kamban working there, though some people avoid communicating with him and prefer postman Unni for the purpose.

"At first the village didn't know how to react to his presence. One half of them kept him at length, going about their business brusquely, afraid that he would take liberties if they demonstrated any signs of familiarity. The other half pretended to look through him, preferring to deal with postman Unni. He wore his aloofness as if it were a protective amulet guaranteed to keep away the wrath of all creatures malevolent. When he had to deal with any of the villagers, he did so awkwardly, shrinking into himself as though afraid that they would think nothing of hurling a stone at him, simply for the pleasure of hearing him yelp." (147)

One fine day Philipose, a Christian comes to the village and takes charge as senior postmaster. From day one he spits insults on Kamban indirectly. He insults him to the core by throwing hateful glances at him for no fault of his. Kamban bears everything silently. Philipose harasses him beyond the limit.

"There was little he could say to fault Kamban's diligence to duty. But that first day he had glimpsed Kamban's sense of inferiority, his precarious self-esteem, he realized here was the wound he could probe and twist his knife into. And it was Kamban who bore the cross of Philipose's wrath". (153)

Kamban is too meek to show any sort of protest. When Unni reports of the humiliations that Kamban suffers at the hands of Philipose, Mukundan asks him why Kamban does not make a complaint. Unni says that Philipose humiliates Kamban in such a way that it could not be pointed out as harassment. He says,

“It’s not as if he says or does anything that could be pointed out as harassment. It is the tone of voice, a twist of phrase – he is a master at subtle insults. Each time he finishes with Kamban, he drains the man of all his dignity”.

One day Philipose is in a very bad temper. As adding fuel to the fire, he hurts his little finger while opening the window of the post office. He shouts and screams so loudly that the villagers assemble before the post office. Philipose looks around and sees Kamban. He showers obnoxious words on Kamban in front of the villagers. Kamban decides that it is time for him to wrest and retaliate. Insults are not new to Kamban. He had sampled social ostracism. As a school boy his classmates had avoided sitting near him. He was not included in the games. But nothing hurt him as much as the insult thrown on him on the day by Philipose.

There is a Tamil proverb meaning, if the meek are angered, the world cannot withstand it. In accordance to this proverb, Kamban is provoked beyond the limits. When he decides to retaliate, Philipose faces terrible experience which affects him physically and psychologically. The readers are really overjoyed at the decision of Kamban and at the damage of Philipose. He uses his secret weapon. Kamban is meek. He is not physically or financially or politically or socially a powerful man. All he could do is to appeal to a greater power to rescue him. The Harijans in that village are feared to be Odiyans - men who can invoke the devils and use them to achieve their purpose.

Kamban had disliked this ancestry, not because of their cleaning up others excrement but because they worshipped forces of darkness. He had always wanted to live a clean man mentally. But Philipose’s atrocities had driven him to find redemption in this darkness. With the help of his uncle, who is powerful Odiyan, Kamban is able to take revenge upon Philipose. Using this power, he could have killed him too. But Kamban is a timid creature at heart. So, he decides that it is enough just to frighten Philipose to the extent of sending him away from the village.

Kamban succeeds in his ‘mission’. The Odiyans’ power haunts the place where Philipose stays. The power of darkness torments him physically and mentally in the guise of a cat. It makes him finally realize that such a horrible punishment he undergoes is due to his unjust and inhuman treatment of Kamban. He runs away from the village for fear of losing his mind and life. Symbolically, Kamban represents the oppressed section of the society which occupies the last rung of the caste ladder and Philipose represents the oppressors who are the upper section of the society.

Changes are possible; but acceptance is a big question mark. Despite the laws and rules that are framed for the welfare of the marginalized, they are not completely free from the Dalit consciousness and inferior feeling. Kamban could have voiced out his protest boldly and legally. But he doesn’t do it. The feeling of being inferior prevents him from doing so. Kamban’s method of retaliation may not be a bold one or it may not be a right strategy. But the just and rightful anger kindled in him is of a greater significance than the method he had adapted for retaliation.

Reference

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